

How we failed to imagine coronavirus:

The vast failures of imagination we've suffered - and the new imaginary now opening up

By Rupert Read.

There were two vast failures of imagination in relation to corona:

- 1) people and (especially!) most governments, and especially those of the USA and UK, failed to imagine exponential growth and how bad it can get.**

Let me outline the reasons for this first failure:

Normalcy bias

It is very hard for human beings to imagine things radically outside their experience, especially things that spiral out of control. A 'normalcy bias' makes us very poor at being ready for 'black swan' events. Uncertainty, 'fat tails' and precaution are little understood. Crude, over-simplified versions of 'evidence-based' analysis predominate.

There has been no true global pandemic with high mortality within the lifetimes of virtually anyone now alive, i.e. since Spanish flu. And since then we have, as humans, become more and more pleased with ourselves, more and more confident that our technology, science and understanding are such that we are allegedly near-invulnerable to threats from the mere natural world.

This is not true. In fact, the contrary is true. We have made our systems fragile.

Systemic risk vs individual risk

Even if it is the case that Covid-19 is low-risk for most individual people (and disturbing evidence is growing of the huge scale, as many of had feared was entirely possible, of 'Long Covid'), the risk to our *system* is high. (Mark Manson explains this distinction well.) A key reason why is: there is a real risk of healthcare systems being overwhelmed, as happened in north Italy in early 2020, and as very nearly happened in the UK in early 2021.

Linear vs exponential risks

Humans are poor at thinking exponentially. Thus poor at thinking epidemics. This helps explain why so many people are even now unable to see that coronavirus poses a completely different order of magnitude of risk therefore to most illnesses (including those caused by lockdowns, such as mental ill-health) we are accustomed to. If Covid had been allowed to let rip through populations, it would probably have

eventually caused about 70-150 million deaths more or less directly, and possibly hundreds of millions more due to the ‘systemic risk’ point just made.

This is why the Precautionary Principle needs applying to pandemics in multiple ways.

2) virtually everyone failed to imagine sufficiently deeply that and how we could stop movement.

Until after the virus had got under national defences, very few flights were stopped or borders closed. (Key [exceptions to this rule include New Zealand](#), which has come out of the crisis smelling of roses.) Virtually no one - [except us Precautionauts and Localists](#) - considered stopping the normal practice - which of course barely existed a century ago during the last comparable event, the Spanish flu - of untrammelled global travel.

Planes are (the real) superspreaders. But the problem goes deeper than that. We need to start imagining not just countries but communities protecting themselves and each other. That means that areas that are serious about suppressing the virus ought to have the right to regulate entry. And that areas which are pools of infection need to be strongly encouraged to regulate exit. We are unlikely to suppress or eliminate the virus everywhere at the same time (although much more international co-ordination of suppression/elimination measures is the only conceivable way we could viably aim at Zero Covid). This implies directly that, if we are serious about ‘crushing the curve’, then we must be willing to imagine communities - nations/states, regions, localities - doing as I just outlined.

This has been very difficult for us because we have become accustomed, in this era of economic hyper-globalisation, to *not* being able to imagine limits to the movement of commodities and people. We, or at least the kind of cosmopolitan middle-classes who are likely most of the readers of *CRJ*, have become accustomed, strangely, to thinking of such movement as *itself* a good thing. This has made it difficult for us to keep alive strong communities (see on this Simone Weil’s brilliant work of applied political philosophy, [The Need for Roots](#)). Neoliberal globalisation has in fact been a tool for destroying communities. Further, a growing self-image we have had of ourselves as individual consumers has added to the lack of imagination: we have started to see it as an absolute right to go where we want when we want, and to see any borders as nothing but a potential infringement on that right.

On the political Right, this can take the form of libertarianism or of an extreme economic ideology of open borders. Thus UK Prime Minister [Boris Johnson warned](#) on Feb. 3rd: “we are starting to hear some bizarre autarkic rhetoric, when barriers are going up, and when there is a risk that new diseases such as coronavirus will trigger a panic and a desire for market segregation that go beyond what is medically rational to the point of doing real and unnecessary economic damage, then at that moment humanity needs some government somewhere that is willing at least to make the case powerfully for freedom of exchange... [for the] right of the populations of the earth to buy and sell freely among each other.” This is the smoking gun that shows his

intention to minimise the virus, and allow people and goods to keep moving in and out of the UK - even if the cost was tens (or hundreds) of thousands of lives. Thus it was that the UK for a while became the only country in the world to have no coronavirus-related border controls, and one of very few to pursue a ‘herd immunity *by way of deadly infection*’ policy. Its per capita death rate has of course become one of the highest in the entire world. So much for being a ‘developed’ country.

On the political Left, the unwillingness to imagine restraints on the movement of people is reactive against nationalism and can take the form of a proposal to abolish borders altogether. This is catastrophic dogmatism, at a time of pandemic.

But as I say, the point is deeper: we need to be willing to imagine restraints on movement not just at international borders but within states as well. Otherwise, we are not serious about the public good and not serious about suppression/elimination of Covid-19.

The lockdowns show the way. As the latest one is lifted, it needs to be replaced with restrictions on movement that are less blunt instruments, more smart policy. We are going to need to be imaginative. We are going to need, in any new Tier system, to find ways of consensually policing movement in and out of areas with low or high infection, particularly areas with new dangerous variants.

Consider for instance the current situation in the UK. The UK Government has once again been anxious to lift what is (from a precautionary perspective) prematurely. But [as I’ve argued elsewhere](#), so centralized is the UK as a nation that it seemingly cannot imagine doing otherwise: see [here](#) for evidence for this sad truth.

To return to international travel: it is truly incredible that, at time of writing (under lockdown in mid Feb. 2021), the UK has still not implemented a proper quarantine-on-entry-in-hotels policy, let alone stopped or dramatically curtailed international travel altogether. Britain has utterly failed to take advantage of its nature as an island. Contrast Taiwan, a similarly cosmopolitan country. It’s total Covid-19 fatalities?: seven.

Some countries HAVE imagined coronavirus

The Taiwan example starts to make very clear that these *difficulties* of imagination that I’ve been describing are not *impossibilities*. We know that *some countries did not fail to imagine coronavirus*. Countries like Taiwan, New Zealand, Vietnam and South Korea got serious about the exponential threat that the virus presented, and imposed massive changes virtually overnight including seriously restricting human movement.

I mean *seriously*. I mean not just the half-arsed lockdowns we’ve experienced in the UK, with many frankly non-essential shops, businesses, factories (not to mention HS2-construction) and *airports* remaining open for business throughout. You can’t stop a virus with a sieve.

New Zealand didn’t just lock down early. They insisted on a complete national quarantine system, to prevent re-infection.

There has just never been seriousness in the UK or US about suppression — let alone elimination — of the virus. NO effort to crush the curve. Just ongoing national pain until the vaccines.

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So far I have outlined the two greatest failures of imagination that occurred in relation to corona. Now I turn, with more concision, to the great feats of imagination that are needed and that become possible in response to it.

There are two vast acts of imagination needed in order to build a better future out of this pandemic disaster:

- 1) **We need to imagine the post-corona reset we desperately need.** We need to dare to imagine a better future: with much less commuting, much less air travel, much less noise and pollution, much less unnecessary economic activity, ...much more care and love, much more localisation of our economy, much more preparedness for future swans of various hues, much more attention to root causes of our troubles, much more restoration of nature... If we fail to imagine this adequately, then we will simply jump from frying-pan to fire. Ie. the literal fires of habitat-destruction and global over-heat. The fires that will destroy the forests now being planted, unless we get serious about the post-Covid reset being climate-safe. The fires this time in Australia and California, and next time anywhere and everywhere, including the UK.
- 2) **Every time we are tempted to retreat into smallness, we need to remember that before Covid-19 so much of what has recently happened seemed completely politically impossible.** Impossible that the world reputation of the US and UK could plummet so far so fast; impossible that so many could decide to value care and love over economic growth; impossible that the magic money tree could be found; impossible that some countries would exercise the ‘vast’ imagination that they actually did, when the virus hit.

We need to be ready to imagine future disasters and catastrophes - and so to plan against them. These plans need to take a *precautionary* form.

We need to protect ourselves against future pandemics first and foremost by building down their causes. We need so far as it is within our power to stop mistreating animals, stop habitat-destruction, and stop dangerous climate change. We need to roll back economic globalisation and human hyper-mobility: once more, planes ARE superspreaders. We need to have serious plans for coping with pandemics; those plans need not to be too tied towards specific diseases (a serious problem with the UK response to Covid-19 was that the UK’s extant pandemic-preparation plans were all centred around a flu). [Anthropogenically-triggered climate decline probabillified Covid-19](#), and stands to increase our exposure to pandemics this century to an almost unimaginable extent: see this terrifying paper:

<https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.01.24.918755v2> .

Similarly: it makes no sense, now that we have been bitten by a pandemic, to shift our attention away from other existential threats to civilisation. On the contrary, the pandemic we are going through ought to teach us how important it is to reduce our

exposure *generally* and to prepare for threats that harbour ‘fat tails’ or catastrophic potential. Most obviously and crucially by far, that means climate and ecology. But it also means other things such as nuclear war, high-impact terrorism and runaway artificial intelligence.

Only the beginning

What’s needed is to overcome the two - linked - failures of imagination that I opened this piece by setting out. The way to do so is obviously through being willing to undertake the two vast acts of imagination just outlined. We need to imagine the coronavirus reset we need; and that necessarily includes overcoming the barriers to imagining that; in particular, it includes being ready to imagine beyond the bad collateral damage caused by the pandemic); we need to imagine the ‘politically impossible’ becoming possible.

But that is only the beginning.

The corona crisis has thrown a dreadful spotlight on the way that our very societal ‘paradigm’ is wrong. The shared experience of vulnerability and empathy that the virus has accidentally gifted the world with will succeed in transforming us only if we help it to, and are serious about the depth of the transformation required.

We need a new imaginary. A new way of seeing ourselves in and being in the world. This is a grand task, way too large for one person let alone one article. But I want to make a start on it here in one key respect. In the remainder of this piece, I want to outline one way of re-imagining our world which creates a whole new imaginary for us to inhabit:

Relocalising our world, post-corona

The coronavirus crisis has been the first massive movement back from the (neo-)liberal project of economic globalisation. That movement needs to be followed through.

The future *will* be more local. Either because we intelligently make it so, or because we suffer the localisation of collapse.

If we go down the route of a tech-heavy mega-platform/digital consumer-capitalism, a culture of separation (each into our individual/familial digi-boxes), and if furthermore this being a single-use throwaway culture is a trend that continues (we need to beware of this tendency in relation to medical PPE for example: we have to find ways of safely re-using it; if we guard against the virus by trashing the ecosystem, then, as I say, we are simply going from frying pan literally to fire)... then we are finished.

Our worldwide vulnerability to pandemic from this new virus came directly from our hyper physical-inter-connectivity. Note that most of this connectivity benefits only a tiny percentage of the world’s population: about 80% of the world’s population have NEVER flown! But the silent risk the 20% carry around with them came home to roost this time.

As my colleagues Nassim Taleb, Joe Norman and Yaneer Bar-Yam warned back in January 2020, this is a key part of what made this coronavirus outbreak

unprecedented - and necessitated a rapid precautionary response. But in the longer term, to build down the problem, we need to shift: to a world that systemically relocalises.

We need to *reinstate localism rather than globalism as the default*. Of course, such localism needs to be ‘fractal’ - of course globalism is needed where appropriate: eg the WHO should be listened to by countries for joined-up-ness of approach (though we also need a reformed WHO: one that is more serious about epidemical precaution and so e.g. is willing to recommend closing borders where helpful!). But communities (*as well as* countries) should be encouraged to keep themselves safe just as individuals are being. And nations will certainly want to [retain more strategic industries](#) in the years to come: many countries have now experienced how little sense it makes to be dependent upon faraway places of which we know little for essentials, such as personal protective equipment, ventilators – and solar panels, and computers - not to mention food...

The future will be global then, in that some things will and should remain non-local. We should have globally joined-up strategy re pandemics, and re other truly global threats such as climate. We should have global emergency-responses where necessary. Information and wisdom should be share globally.

But that’s about it. The vast array of economic globalisation has fragilised us. It has diffused responsibility, it has massively increased climate-deadly emissions, it has ripped up habitats and ecosystems everywhere. The direction of travel as it were of commodities, people, finance and ‘production’ should be back toward the local.

Covid-19 *forces* us, wonderfully, to **think like a community**. ... In the best possible sense, the coronavirus actually does force us to think like a ‘herd’... in the early stages of a pandemic, it is tempting to think like an individual, and so to think only: the chances of me suffering from this, at least at this point, are very remote. The chances of me carrying this and infecting others, at least at this point, are likewise very remote. So I’ll go on acting as I normally do for now. But if everyone thinks like that then it guarantees that the pandemic will spread like wildfire — and that soon it will no longer be true that the chances are remote. In fact, such individualistic thinking guarantees a public health catastrophe. What is needed instead is for everyone to think toward the community level at least, *from the beginning*. And so that is how we have been learning to think.

For where we haven’t, we’ve painfully noticed the cost.

Stop the virus both ways. Stop it from entering a community, and stop it from leaving a community where it has entered.

This is the collective, thorough version of the test-trace-isolate mantra.

Why, in sum, have the grievous failures of imagination that have exercised me in these pages occurred? I’ve outlined a number of reasons, but there is one which is focal for our time, and which in effect sums up the thrust of this article: [highly dense energy limits the human imagination](#). And: it is just such energy which has fuelled the collective insanity of hyper-globalisation.

The beginning is near...

This piece has concerned some grave failures of imagination, around what is possible: both in terms of exponential harm (the virus; climate) and of good (a better reset). Failures of imagination around how problematic institutions (e.g. the digital behemoths) could, potentially, be changed - or fail. Failures in terms of what we didn't imagine at all, both ill — and good (the remarkable willingness of countries like New Zealand to act seriously on the virus; the remarkable willingness of countries to find 'the magic money tree' when they had a will to). And then there is what we still don't imagine: which, by definition, we don't know what it is yet. The imaginability of threats, dangerous scenarios, new inventions, wonders and beauties unknown, wonderful scenarios and possibilities is always one of our most important tasks, and never more than at a time like this.

Most importantly of all: we need a new imaginary for ourselves / for society / for the globe, if we are to have a decent chance of getting through what is coming. For what is coming will make the current corona-crisis — bigger though it is by some way than many governments and people have realised even yet — look small.

You only get one chance to prevent a pandemic. We live in a world we will never understand, predict or control. We need therefore to maximise the chances that the one way that the world actually works out is not a way featuring existential damage. Or we'll exit the gene-pool.

The huge cost - in both money AND lives - of the failure in much of the world, and especially in the USA and UK, to apply precautionary reasoning to coronavirus, may wake people up. It will, to the extent that they get to imagine big in the way this article has sought to encourage. And in any case: the at-least partial waking up that is occurring (vis-a-vis how good it is to hear the birds sing more, how we don't need to commute so much, and much more) itself makes possible bigger imaginings. It itself makes possible the kind of shift implicit and explicit in this piece.

If we are to survive, let alone flourish, we need to change up. This crisis is our chance. Realistically, it is our last chance. The nature of the post-Covid reset will determine the course of the decade. And this decade will determine whether or not we get to prevent three degrees or more of global over-heat — which would be civilisation-ending.

From the horror of corona, if we retrieve the drive to localise and more, we'll be building the best possible memorial to the hundreds of thousands in the English-speaking world who have unnecessarily died.

The coronavirus crisis is like the climate crisis, only dramatically telescoped in terms of time (and scale of potential mortality), by orders of magnitude. We have seen the logic in relation to the corona crisis of a short-term protective contraction of the economy. The pandemic lifestyle-change — under lockdown — is *more extreme* than

that that will be required of us adequately to address the climate crisis. Let's make the less extreme changes required for safe living with a stable climate — but forever. It's like comparing an acute with a chronic condition. Coronavirus is an acute condition; both individuals and whole societies need to respond to it dramatically. But probably not for a very long period of time, certainly not if prevention/elimination is successfully achieved, or at least relative success via vaccine. There will be no vaccine for climate chaos. The climate crisis is a chronic condition; it will take decades upon decades of profound determination and commitment and 'sacrifice' not to be overwhelmed by it, as a society / a globe. But the changes we need to make in order to achieve that goal are more attractive than those made in order to fight the coronavirus. The life we live in a climate-safe world can be a better life. Saner, more rooted and local, more secure, with stronger communities and less uncertainty about our common future, less hyper-materialistic, more caring, with more nature. Building care, ethics, and precautionousness into the very warp and weft of how we live.

Let's choose well.